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## **Parent Power: A Positive Link to School Success**

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### **Linking Parents and Possibilities**

Sun-drenched parents and their children covet shade near the portable offices that serve the Second Language Programs Department (SLPD) of the Clark County (Nevada) School District. The year is 1989, and during the next nine months, 4,000 students acquiring English (SAE) will fill classrooms across the district. Languages other than English ripple through the outdoor waiting space. A small group of SLPD staff stands poised to provide the initial support that links parents and children to schools. Anxious parents' questions become points of conversation:

1. "Are there Spanish speaking staff at the school site if I need to talk to someone about my child's schooling?"
2. "Will bilingual instruction cause my child to lag behind?"
3. "What can I do if I don't feel my child is progressing or making the growth I feel she/he should be making?"
4. "What can I do if the work seems to be too difficult and my child is feeling frustrated and overwhelmed?"
5. I speak little or no English. Is there a place I can go to learn English?"

While the questions asked by parents in 1989 continue to be asked by parents in 1995, many changes have occurred in the program responsible for providing quality educational programs for SAE. Newly renovated buildings have replaced the portable offices, and parents and children now wait for services in air-conditioned rooms. But, more than the surface has changed: important changes also have occurred with the overall role that the SLPD plays within the Clark County School District.

### **Linking Parents and Programs**

Since 1989 the Clark County (Nevada) School District (CCSD) has experienced unprecedented growth.

Currently, CCSD is the 11th largest school district in the United States, and the number of students acquiring English has increased to over 14,000. A consistent priority of the Second Language Programs Department (SLPD) is to strengthen the link between schools and parents. As the number of students in the program continued to increase, it became clear that greater parental involvement was the key to success. Our belief in parent power required that we establish proactive policies and plan to encourage parental commitment to our schools.

In establishing this relationship between parents and schools, we became aware of reasons that minority and immigrant parents are unable to successfully link. Many newcomer parents are not proficient in the language of their adopted country and, therefore, they are reluctant to enter into situations which require the use of that language (Piper, 1993; Au, 1993). Another reason parents may not be involved with schools is they "are unfamiliar with the mainstream culture of the school" (Au, 1993, p. 153). These parents may be unaccustomed to questioning or challenging educational decisions concerning their children, and these parents may lack experience dealing with an educational system that solicits their perspectives. Delgado-Gaitan (1993) recognizes this loss: "the opportunity to build on familial and cultural strengths has, for the most part, gone untapped" (p. 139). Harrison (1993) believes the primary reason that immigrant parents are infrequent participants in school activities or community organizations is that the immigrant parents' primary concerns often deal with day-to-day survival.

We consider the parental link to the child and the school essential in nurturing educational success. This link occurs through direct and indirect support by parents. Direct support reflects a high degree of visible engagement with the schools, e.g., attending school-sponsored functions and participating in the child's educational plans and progress. Indirect support manifests itself through positive attitudes toward schooling, home-based support of the child, and valuing of education per se. Our goal was to develop the concept of a "community of parents" which Piper (1993) describes: They care about the educational welfare of their children. They have certain expectations about the outcomes of formal education. They have beliefs about how those outcomes might best be achieved (although they may or may not be willing to express those beliefs in public). (p. 295)

In promoting the parent-child-school link, we wanted to develop programs that recognized parents in the role of decision-makers and as partners with schools. As Phelan, Davidson, and Yu (1993) claim: "We know a great deal about how aspects of families, schools and teachers, and peer groups independently affect educational outcomes" (p. 54); however, we need also to establish the importance of the influence of and interaction between the home and school cultures.

### **Linking Parents and Schools: One School District's Plan**

Schools and teachers are primarily responsible for education, but they cannot do the job alone. They need the support and participation of parents. An optimal level of parental participation does not just happen; it must be initiated and nurtured by teachers and schools. (Piper, 1993, p. 302)

The Second Language Programs Department in the Clark County (Nevada) School District ascribes to Piper's (1993) mandate to increase parent involvement to an optimal level. The SLPD's primary responsibility is to plan, develop, and implement programs for more than 14,000 students acquiring English in the district.

Two of the six goals identified by the SLPD in *Strength in Diversity: Second Language Programs Department Procedures Handbook* (1994) relate to the belief that the home-school relationship is crucial.

These goals are:

1. Students acquiring English will be oriented concerning American life and culture.
2. SLPD teachers and staff will foster a positive self-concept, develop self-esteem, and encourage pride in bilingualism /biculturalism in students acquiring English (p. 2).

Underpinning the SLPD's goals is the recognition that schools help parents foster self-esteem and a positive self-concept while providing an orientation to American schools and society. In realizing our goals, we believe minority and immigrant parent involvement with school is vital.

Minority and immigrant parents share vital knowledge about children's languages and cultures and how these characteristics affect the educational setting. Harrison's (1993) research of Alaskan and Maori (New Zealand) parent involvement demonstrates that "parents believed that each child's identity should be grounded in his or her cultural background" (p. 148).

Parental involvement is vital because it helps guide ways in which schools can be effective in meeting minority and immigrant learners' needs. Delgado-Gaitan (1993) recognizes the value of empowering parents as decision makers: "The importance of family and community strengths is stressed as a starting point in considering educational intervention affecting the home... diverse family forms are valid and need to be promoted" (pp. 146-147). Harrison (1993) concludes: If approached properly, parent participation and support can be encouraged and increased....School personnel need to see minority adults as partners, not clients, in the school endeavor, and interactions with parents also need to be structured in culturally appropriate ways (p. 160).

Finally, parents' expectations serve as a vital component in promoting school success for their children. As Ogbu (1993) relates these expectations are positive: "Many immigrants regard the public schools as offering an education far superior to what was available in their homeland.... some immigrants believe they are treated better in the public schools than they would be treated by the schools of their country of origin" (p. 100).

### **Linking Parental Rights With School Roles**

Parent power is gained through rights: (a) the right to a free, appropriate public education, (b) the right to receive information concerning educational decisions and actions in the language parents comprehend, and (c) the right to make informed decisions and to authorize consent before changes in educational placement occur. Parents have a right to be included in discussions and plans concerning disciplinary action toward their children. Parents also have a right to appeal actions when they do not agree. Additionally, parents have a right to participate in meetings organized for public and parent information, including parent-teacher associations and board of school trustees meetings. These rights must be respected and honored despite challenges they may present to the educational system.

With the responsibility for planning programs to meet the needs of students acquiring English, SLPD staff are concerned with developing and implementing strategies to include the involvement of minority and immigrant parents. When parents are involved in tutoring, monitoring, supporting, encouraging, and questioning, when necessary, actions proposed by the school, their children's chances for school success are greatly enhanced. The underlying philosophy of the SLPD is that minority and immigrant parents want direct involvement in their children's education. When parents are not involved, it often is a result of not

having the necessary information. When information is provided, immigrant parents are involved as active participants in the educational process.

### Linking Parents and Assessment

Crawford (1993) stresses the value in providing avenues for parents in assessment and evaluation. Conferences with parents allow the parents to participate in making instructional decisions about their children. Home visits also are recommended, and teachers are urged to ensure that such visits are culturally acceptable or would not cause embarrassment for the child or family. Philosophies such as this reflect SLPD practices to link parents and children with schools.

SLPD involvement in the education of immigrant students acquiring English begins when they enter their neighborhood schools for registration in the CCSD. Parent information is solicited as part of the registration process through three questions on a "Home Language Survey" (Available in English and Spanish):

1. "What is the first language learned (by the child)?"
2. "What language is spoken (by the child) with friends?"
3. "What language is used in the home?"

The purpose of these questions is to determine the degree to which students rely on a language other than English. Although brief, the "Home Language Survey" begins the process of identifying students who might be eligible to receive second language acquisition services. This self-identification process is designed to allow parents to document their beliefs concerning the English status of their children. It prevents students from mistakenly being identified by school staff as students acquiring English based solely on opinions gleaned from observation. The "Home Language Survey" identifies which students need English language proficiency testing. Parents may accept or decline formal assessment at this juncture which makes visible the parents' roles in planning their children's schooling.

As part of the school registration process, students may be scheduled for English language proficiency testing at a centralized testing facility or at one of 17 decentralized Satellite Testing Centers. The SLPD eligibility test battery consists of formal and informal assessment, and testing occurs after the registration process is completed at the school. The formal battery includes (a) the *Language Assessment Scales (LAS)* (Duncan & Avila, 1990), including the oral, reading, and writing subtests in Spanish and English; and (b) Spanish and English subtests of the *Brigance Diagnostic Assessment of Basic Skills* (1984).

Informal assessment occurs through a parent interview to obtain a comprehensive education summary. Peregoy and Boyle (1993) state that obtaining as much information as possible about the child's previous school experience and sharing knowledge of the home culture and customs are roles parents can play in helping school personnel acclimate students to new situations. These authors state further that assessing heritage/native language background as well as length of residence (LOR), the circumstances of immigration, and the home situation are areas that also might be pursued. In CCSD a parent or guardian is asked to accompany the student to the testing appointment. As part of the testing process, parents are included in an interview which determines the student's previous years of education, language of instruction, and credits earned. While the parents are present, school personnel can also survey them to find out special talents they have, solicit information regarding the child's interests, and explore ways parents can support their child's education.

In the SLPD handbook, *Strength in Diversity* (1994), three goals relate specifically to English language education:

- (1) Students acquiring English proficiency will be ensured an equal educational opportunity.
- (2) Students acquiring English proficiency will be provided with the acquisition of language skills through content area instruction which will allow them full participation in a non-SLPD classroom.
- (3) Educationally appropriate placement options will be provided to all students acquiring English (p. 2).

Although testing and placement are integral to the success of these goals, parents have the right to refuse testing and other services provided by the SLPD. If parents or guardians disagree with the school's recommendation for testing, they are given the opportunity to decline the procedure by so indicating on an "Assessment Center Parent Referral" form. During the 1994 -95 school year, approximately 13,000 students were referred for testing and placement; 125 (about one percent) declined placement. The primary reason cited is the parents' belief that immersion in English-instruction classes is the best way to help their children become American.

Upon accepting the recommendation for English language proficiency testing, a student appointment is scheduled by the school staff. When testing is completed, parents attend an exit conference conducted by a teacher facilitator or administrative specialist with background and training in language proficiency assessment and counseling. During the conference, test results are reviewed, and program placement recommendations are made. Parents receive information about the recommended school and program, including the language acquisition program model (English language or bilingual education), the school schedule (nine month or year round), the number of students enrolled at the school, and other information. When parents have received all the information concerning language assessment and recommended placement, they have the opportunity to participate as decision makers in their child's program. Parents may (a) agree with the placement recommendation, or (b) disagree with the placement recommendation, and (c) provide comments and recommendations regarding their child's program.

### **Linking Parents and Support Systems**

The SLPD provides support and reassurance, and we use the time at the Assessment Center to expose parents to CCSD. The SLPD is developing a Clark County School District Orientation videotape that parents may view while awaiting the assessment of their children. The videotape, recorded in Spanish with English subtitles, presents district-wide and individual school policies and procedures deemed essential for school success which non-English speaking parents might otherwise not receive. The videotape includes information on the school day, student dress code, grading policies, behavior expectations, and attendance policies. The tape also includes information on the number of credits required for graduation and course offerings at all levels. Information on extracurricular activities, the school lunch program, transportation services, health services, and special programs availability is also included. Parents are given a directory that includes important district phone numbers and the names of Spanish speaking contact persons in each department and school. The information provided by SLPD staff to SAE parents at the initial INTAKE assessment is an effort to create a comfortable and supportive setting for parents in a new and often unfamiliar American public school system.

Parents also are involved when their children are reclassified. Reclassification testing occurs when children achieve a minimal level of competency with English and are judged ready to participate in general

education classes with no SLP support. Traditionally, assessment occurs biennially, but reclassification requests are accepted at any time.

Parents can also participate in discussions about placements at regularly scheduled parent conferences and school open house meetings. Delgado-Gaitan (1993) explains that "organized efforts are necessary in order to provide parents with explicit knowledge about schools. Parent education workshops, classes, and parent-school meetings must be available for *all* parents" (p. 145). Additionally, SLPD staff are: (a) available to assist in meetings (conferences, open-houses) to provide translation services and/or program information; (b) involved, on a regular basis, in PTA meetings to provide a communication bridge for parents; (c) participants in a district-wide Parent Pride program designed to bring parents together to share experiences and to gain information about their child's program; and (d) coordinators of transportation and presentations of special meetings involving minority and immigrant parents.

### **Linking Parents and Information**

As stated earlier one barrier that inhibits a strong link between minority and immigrant parents and schools is related to language difficulties. The SLPD translation services are provided to meet our goal that: "All correspondence and communication to parents (e.g., forms, letters, booklets) should be distributed in the language of the parents" ( *Strength in Diversity*, 1994, p. 27). This opening statement in the section dealing with translation services reflects the specific sentiment of the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights Policy Update, (1991). Materials translated into Spanish are made available to parents on the basis that 94 percent of the SAE in our district are Hispanic. Additionally, we believe that the majority of the immigrant parents in CCSD are fully literate. With respect to other language groups, the SLPD provides translation services through arrangements with speakers of languages other than English and Spanish.

The SLPD provides a number of services and materials to engage parents directly. As long as students are affiliated with the SLPD, we attempt to maintain communication with parents through a monthly newsletter. The newsletter, titled *Boletín de Información Para Padres de Familia* is distributed district wide to parents of SLPD students and includes a variety of information such as checklists for parent use in assisting their children to achieve excellence in the school program and strategies for successful parent-teacher conferences. On occasion, parents are invited to respond to surveys included in the *Boletín de Información*. The purpose of the surveys is to give parents a vehicle to express their concerns and desires to department staff who relay this information to the appropriate divisions within the school district. In addition to the monthly communication established by the department, approximately 60 district-wide and individual school parent communication forms have been translated into Spanish. This service, offered through the department, ensures that schools and departments are able to communicate their information with Spanish speakers who do not read English. Also included in the information translated for Spanish speaking parents is *Edición de Regreso a la Escuela-Reporter*. The Spanish and English versions of *The Reporter* are distributed district-wide to the 155,000 students in the Clark County School District at the beginning of each school year and include general district information.

### **Linking Parents and Planning**

During the past six years, the SLPD has implemented various strategies to encourage parent involvement. Not all of those strategies, however, are always successful. For example, we discovered the importance of providing opportunities for school -based personnel to work directly with parents.

Meetings (by geographic area), designed to inform parents of services available in the district and in the

community, were conducted by SLPD staff. Guest speakers from various departments and programs throughout the school district and the community also participated. The school-based parent meetings were considered valuable, but SLPD staff developed concerns about the centralized grouping of parents for meetings. Further, many SLPD staff were reluctant to respond to site -specific questions raised by the parents. Parents attending the meetings tended to bond with SLPD staff, hence, the parents did not develop a comfort level with the administration and teachers at their neighborhood schools. When issues or questions arose at the school level, SLPD staff were asked to intervene at the school on behalf of the parents. This situation was considered undesirable because the goal of the parent meetings was to create a link between parents and schools. To ameliorate this situation, parent meetings were scheduled by the school staff at their neighborhood schools. SLPD staff would assist through collaboration, presentations, demonstrations, and translation services as necessary. Schools implementing this recommendation noted increased parent involvement and increased parent confidence in the school program.

### **Linking Parents and Power**

The SLPD is an example of a program designed to engage parents as supporters of education. Delgado-Gaitan (1993) states: "Parents' decision making occurs through strategies to promote their participation" (p. 145). In CCSD, the same parents come to school to participate in the multiple opportunities for parent involvement. One goal of the SLPD is to promote better coordination among the various agencies so these parents do not attend one meeting after another in which they hear the same message. Parents who cannot get to school can telephone in questions and requests for information using a Spanish-language hot-line available through the district office. A Homework Hotline is available to English speaking parents and children, and plans now are being made to provide the same service for Spanish-speakers.

The SLPD also provides informal referral services (e.g., Catholic Community Services, Health Department, Parent Teacher Association) which helps families feel that the school recognizes their needs beyond school-supported programs. Fuentes (1986) described the importance of parents as tutors, and the SLPD "Math Their Way" program provides parents with preparation they need to fill the role of tutor with their children. Au (1993) recognizes the need for parents as classroom supporters as well by providing frequent communication with parents through newsletters and brief notes.

English language classes facilitated by SLPD staff are another tool to empower parents. In schools with a high enrollment, SLPD staff are available to conduct English language classes for parents. The SLPD staff work a seven hour day. Six hours are spent assisting in the classroom, and the seventh hour is dedicated to teaching the English language classes. The schools offering this program to parents are experiencing increased parent involvement in other school activities.

Another area in which the SLPD is involved is found in support of parent clubs and groups. Garlington (1991) recommends establishing a Parents' Club in the school to decrease dropout rates of minority students and to help parents understand their rights to negotiate with the schools. A group established by the SLPD is *Padres Organizados por el Derecho al la Educación de las Razas (PODER)*. This group is becomingly increasingly active in CCSD, and members of this organization recently attended a parent leadership training institute affiliated with the 24th Annual International Bilingual/Multicultural Education Conference in Phoenix, Arizona. This group is gaining in stature as it plans to identify specific educational goals in collaboration with the CCSD Public Education Foundation.

Responding to the rapid growth required that the SLPD respond quickly and efficiently. We believe we have developed a quality program, one that is based in providing valid information to parents. Parents for whom

services are provided consistently interact with the same SLPD personnel since there is a low frequency of turn-over in the department. Parents no longer wait outside a small portable office, but instead they can wait in a comfortable waiting room. The SLPD has been institutionalized and recognized as an integral part of the services provided parents throughout CCSD. Issues related to cultural and linguistic diversity are heard throughout the district, and SAE are viewed as a parallel population rather than separate from the mainstream. SLPD voices also are heard within the State of Nevada where the State legislature is considering a bill that specifies school districts' responsibilities to provide services for SAE.

We believe that minority and immigrant parents in CCSD are provided with the means to be committed partners with schools. In providing avenues for their involvement, these parents are afforded opportunities to participate with schools on equal footing with majority parents. Despite language, culture, and sociopolitical barriers, minority and immigrant parents are participating with schools, and they are exercising their parent power. Perhaps the greatest power these immigrants hold is the promise of redefining the cultural and linguistic milieu, and the greatest place for their influence is as partners in schools. It is time to do all that we can to invite these precious resources into the classrooms of our Nation's schools before it is too late for all of us.

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